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SUBJECT: "FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE IN ETHIOPIA": A NEW
OPPOSITION COALITION

¶1. (U) On June 24, 2008, representatives from the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), Somali Democratic Alliance Forces (SDAF), Arena Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty (Arena), former President of Ethiopia Dr. Negasso Gidada, and former Defense Minister and ruling party Central Committee member Seeye Abraha formed the "Forum For Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia". Participants report creating the Forum in response to the failure of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to deliver promised human and democratic rights to the people. Citing the high levels of poverty, widespread hunger, and continuous ethnic clashes, the Forum argued for the need for new political leadership. Unlike Ethiopia's tradition of fractured opposition movements, the Forum is a diverse group of opposition parties united by a common political agenda to exert pressure on the ruling party and government to create a conducive political environment for free and fair elections and plan a common strategy for the forthcoming local and national elections of 2010.

¶2. (U) The primary goal of the Forum is to present a unified and significant challenge to the EPDRF in the 2010 elections. In accordance with this goal, the Forum plans to organize discussions and debates around fundamental issues to identify common political platforms on which all parties in the Forum can adopt. It seeks to mobilize the people of Ethiopia to seek solutions to pressing national and local issues through peaceful and legal means of recourse.

COMMENT

¶3. (SBU) The formation of such a diverse and viable opposition movement within Ethiopia is unprecedented and highly significant. The coalition's members are very influential leaders within their communities, and their coming together could mark an opportunity to move beyond the tradition of splintered opposition groups unable to dislodge the EPDRF. Like the still-born Alliance for Freedom and Democracy established by diaspora opposition groups, including insurgent groups in May 2006, the Forum's inclusion of Oromos and Amharas together with Somalis and former ruling party Central Committee members will certainly be viewed by the GoE as a threat. The fact that domestically operational, legal opposition groups have established this group within Ethiopia is particularly notable. Post will follow the development of the Forum closely in coming weeks and months.

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